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CHANGES IN PEASANT LIFE SINCE LAND REFORM IN CHINA

T'u-ti Kai-ko-hou-ti Chung-kuo Nung-ts'un (China's Countryside After Land Reform), published by T'ung-su Wen-hua Ch'u-p'an She Shanghai, 1950

[Summary: Land reform has been the only solution to the injustices of the old Chinese land system. Ownership of land by the peasants has released abundant creative forces. Consequently, the rise in purchasing power and living standards has been rapid. This has had a stimulating effect on industrial production. Interest in new implements and new agricultural techniques has spread rapidly since land reform. Large areas of new land are being opened to cultivation, especially in the Northeast.

The peasants' political consciousness has risen and participations in government has increased. Desire for education and general cultural advance is everywhere manifest.]

"Land to the Tiller" Becomes Real

From time immemorial China's land system has been unjust. Landlords and rich peasants, constituting 10 percent of the rural population owned from 70 to 80 percent of the land. The other 90 percent of the population, made up of middle class, poor, and hired peasantry were dependent upon renting land from the landlords and wealthy peasants for their living.

The landowners usually charged one half of the crop as rent plus various other perquisites. Consequently, the renters were always in a state of dire poverty while the landowners led a parasitic existence of affluence.

This situation accounted for the backwardness and the national weakness of China. Without a rectification of this situation the fruits of the people's revolution and the industrialization of the economy can never be realized.

Land reform is the medium for the accomplishment of our objective. This type of reform has nearly two decades of history in China. It began in the Kiangsi Soviet and was expanded during the period following the anti-Japanese war. The promulgation of the Land Problem Directive of 4 May 1946, and the 10 October 1947 Outline of the Land Reform crystallized the policy further. By the time of the proclamation of the Land Reform Law, 30 June 1950, in areas populated by 104,500,000 people land reform had been completely or basically carried out. Beginning in 1948, land reform was basically completed by the spring of 1948 in the Northeast and completely finished soon after the complete liberation of the area in the winter of 1948.

During the winters of 1946 through 1949, land reform was carried out among 54 million peasants in the four provinces of Shansi, Hopeh, Chahar and P'ingyuan in North China. In the Shensi-Kansu-Ningsia border area land reform was carried out during the anti-Japanese war period.

By the spring of 1950, land reform had been carried out in 43 hsiens of northern Honan. From 1946 to 1948, land reform was carried out among 45 million people in the northern areas of East China.

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In the Peiping and Tientsin suburban areas all land belonging to landlords and all surplus rented land of wealthy peasants was taken over as property of the state. Lands belonging to the villages, as well as the surplus buildings, equipment, and surplus grain of the landlords, were distributed among the poor peasants. The state land was also allotted for cultivation to poor and hired peasants, handicraft workers, unemployed and certain other indigent rural dwellers willing to engage in farming.

In a typical village in Yeh-t'ing (or Yen-ch'eng) Hsien in Kiangsu, made up of 58 families with a total of 298 persons, 280 mou of the 878 mou of land belonging to the village belonged to two landlord families with a combined total of 11 persons. In contrast, 42 families of hired and poor peasants having a total of 220 persons together owned only 191 mou, or less than one mou per person. During land reform each of these persons received 3 mou of land.

Working on One's Own Land

Land reform wrought basic changes in production relations of the peasants. Ownership of land inevitably heightened the interest of the peasants in increasing production.

In some areas of Liaotung Province, production of grain rose from 230 catties per mou in 1942 to over 300 catties in 1950.

In Heilungkiang Province the average crop production for the province in 1947 was 1,500 catties per hectare; in 1948, 1,800 catties; and in 1949, in spite of drought, the average production rose to 2,000 catties per mou. This was due to the more intensive cultivation the farmers employed after land reform.

In the T'ai-hsing Shan area of Shansi, where land reform took place in 1946, in an area frequently pillaged by the Japanese during their occupation, production reached nearly double that of the prewar period. In another Shansi area where the prewar average grain production was 1.3 piculs per mou, by 1949 it had reached 2.1 piculs; in still another area production rose to 2.6 piculs in 1949 from a prewar yield of 1.28 piculs.

By 1949, production in other parts of Shansi rose from the prewar 150 catties per mou to 300 catties per mou.

In areas of Shantung where before land reform the practice was to cultivate wheat once and corn five times a season, wheat is now cultivated twice and corn eight times.

In Yeh-t'ing Hsien, Kiangsu, 776 mou of land that yielded 85,470 catties of wheat before the war yielded 92,260 catties in 1949 after land reform. In 1950, 746 mou yielded 112,756 catties.

Under the inspiration of personal ownership, farmers everywhere are greatly increasing the amount of fertilizer used and are improving their techniques of application. In an area in North Kiangsu, the official estimates for increased crop production in 1950 called for 22 piculs of manure per mou on rice and wheat land and 12 or 13 cartloads on land planted to early crops. However, throughout the area from 35 to 50 piculs of manure was applied per mou on rice and wheat land.

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Preliminary Steps in Scientific Techniques

Following land reform the peasants have begun to take an interest in scientific agricultural techniques. They are experimenting with new and improved seeds and better handling methods and are finding that yields rise.

By building and repairing dikes of irrigation facilities in six hsiens in Shansi, 500,000 mou of land have been brought into arable condition. By digging canals and wells, another 78,000 mou were added to the irrigated area in the six hsiens, increasing production by 190,000 piculs. By repairing dikes, digging irrigation canals, wells, and drainage ditches peasants in the area around Peiping, saved 120,000 mou of land from floods and 19,000 mou from drought damage.

Short courses of lectures and study of technical progress are popular with peasants over the country. In the rice-growing provinces of Sungkiang, Kirin, and Liaotung in the Northeast the rice growers have shifted from broadcast sowing to row planting with a resulting increased production of 20 to 30 percent. Use of a hot beds for sprouting plants makes possible the growing of better grade long-season rice.

In wheat-growing Heilungkiang, seed selection, seed testing, and seed disinfection are being practiced; this has resulted in up to 98 percent germination. Following the use of "wang-t'ung" (king cooper) as a seed disinfectant, production of 120,000 mou of wheat was increased 2 million catties. During 1950, the Northeast authorities promoted the use of "k'o-hua" wheat seed which is a superior type and yields 15 percent more than other varieties in the area. Another new development since land reform is the introduction of winter wheat into northern Manchuria where winter temperatures reach 41 degrees below zero Fahrenheit. By 1950, one million mou of winter wheat was expected to be planted. Winter wheat yields 30 catties per mou more than spring wheat and its value yield is three times that of coarse grains. Because winter wheat ripens early it escapes the diseases that attack spring wheat in this area. It also permits the growing of two crops a year on the same land.

Growing of textile raw materials is on the increase in the Northeast. In 1950, 4 million mou was under cotton. Liaosi Province had 1,500,000 mou of this total. Generally speaking the value of one mou of cotton production in the Northeast is equal to the value of 3 mou of grain crops. In Hopeh cotton yields four to five times the value of grain per mou. Acreages under cotton in various provinces in China proper during 1950 were as follows: Hopeh 14,000,000 mou, Shansi 2,300,000 mou, Shantung 5,300,000 mou, North Kiangsu 3,500,000 mou. All these acreages represent sizeable increases over the 1949 figures.

Considerable advance has been made since land reform in improving seed and combating aphids. The "Ssu-tzu" variety of cotton has met with growing popularity. Several provinces have established improved cotton cultivation control bureaus. Better methods of cultivation and improved fertilization techniques have also aided in increasing production. In the Shih-chia-chuang Special Administrative District in Hopeh the average yield is expected to be 150 catties of unginned cotton per mou.

The production of other industrial raw materials, such as sugar, beets, tobacco, coarse fibers, and oil seeds, is on the increase.

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Improved Implements

With the increased interest of the farmers in better cultivation of their own land since land reform has come eagerness to acquire new labor-saving implements. Particularly in the Northeast, the demand for such implements is increasingly heavy.

The best a first-class man with a hoe can do is to hoe 2 mou per day. In areas where the population is scattered and the labor force short it is impossible to do proper cultivation with hoes. A local blacksmith in one area devised a simple cultivator that can be drawn by man or beast. Two men and one animal using this implement can cultivate 25 mou a day. The demand for this implement is rapidly expanding. In other areas other farmers have been devising a variety of new implements.

In 1950, the Northeast People's Government bought 3,000 horse-drawn implements from the Soviet Union and distributed them among the state farms for practices and cadre training purposes. Some 42 mutual aid teams in the Northeast were loaned sets of 13 implements each, ranging from plows and cultivators to threshing machines. On old land, a seeder pulled by four horses and attended by two men can plant 6 hectares of wheat a day, saving from 10 to 12 man-days and from 2 to 8 days of horse labor, as compared with old methods.

Weeding cultivators can cover 25 mou a day. In Na-ho Hsien, Heilungkiang, up to 45 mou a day was cultivated by mutual aid teams. Cultivation as many as five times a season is possible with this machinery as compared with two and three times in the past. One harvester can cut 22 mou of wheat a day with a saving of 8 man-days of labor as compared with sickles.

Organization

Organization is the way for the peasants to overcome the difficulties of small-scale individual operations. Wherever the organization of mutual aid cooperative activities is well advanced, crop production and supplementary activities increase; animals, new houses, and equipment are found; and the standard of living is generally elevated.

Three problems that remain in connection with peasant organization are as follows:

1. While mutual aid organizations in the beginning are organized primarily to relieve labor shortages, when they become stabilized, they result in a labor surplus.
2. Mutual aid organizations should be operated wholly on a voluntary membership basis. One incentive to voluntary membership is an equitable wage system. If this is lacking, present members will want to withdraw and prospective members will be hesitant to join.
3. The logical way to dispose of surplus labor force is to direct it into city industries, lumbering, and mining. In the Northeast this has been carried out to a large extent. Another way is to develop supplementary rural industries.

When peasants go into industry they entrust the operation of their own land to the mutual aid teams and send money from their industrial wages to pay their share of the labor costs assessed against their land.

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Wasteland Converted to Good Fields

During 1948 and 1949, over 14,720,000 mou of new land was put under cultivation in the Northeast, or 132 percent of the goal. During 1950, 5,397,000 mou were opened up. Some 2,937,000 mou of this was in the two northernmost provinces of Heilungkiang and Sungkiang, or about 4 percent of the cultivated area of the two provinces. In the two more thickly populated southern provinces of Liaotung and Liaosi about one million mou of new land was put under cultivation. In Jehol, 848,000 mou was opened up, adding 6 percent to the arable land of the province.

It is expected that the increased yield from 1,400,000 mou of land opened in Singkiang in 1950 will add 161,400 tons to the food supply.

In other provinces there is less unused land available. However, areas of from 10,000 to 50,000 mou have been brought under cultivation since land reform. Much of this land was not cultivated under the KMT government because the owners feared that acknowledgment of ownership would result in confiscatory taxation.

In China the ratio of cultivated area to the total land area is still small.

Even under land reform the amount of land received by the families is capable of producing only enough for minimum needs. There are only two ways, under these circumstances, to elevate the standard of living of the masses, that is improvement of techniques to increase yield, and opening up wild land to increase area. Eventually improved techniques should make possible tilling of much land that is now too arid or too mountainous for cultivation with present methods.

Expansion of Reinvestment

Since land reform, improved conditions have made reinvestment of agricultural capital in production feasible. Increased earnings and a liberal government loan policy have made increasing investment in work animals and equipment possible.

During recent years, increase in investment in equipment and work animals in the northeast has been rapid.

In Liaotung Province, in 1949, some 174,000 work animals were purchased and in Sungkiang Province 27,000. Thousands of new farm carts have been purchased by farmers. In one of the villages of K'o-shan Hsien, Heilungkiang, in 1948, investment in production materials was 11.8 percent of total outlay. In 1950, it was 23 percent, and for 1951 the estimate is for 33.7 percent. In other areas throughout the Northeast similar advances are being made. Blacksmiths and cartmakers are doing a rushing business. At present, all country carts in the Northeast are rubber tired. Manufacturers of rubber tires find business very good.

Government loans have greatly aided farmers in increasing agricultural investment. During 1949, the North China authorities advanced 582 million yuan in such loans. In Shansi, 180,000 head of work animals were purchased [1949]. In 1950, 250,000 animals will be added. In 1950, in North China, 14,300,000 agricultural implements and tools were purchased. In 1949, the government in North China sold equipment at bargain prices through the trade cooperatives to the value of 170 million catties of millet.

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In the spring of 1950, 16 wood and iron working shops were built in Shouyang Hsien, Shansi, for the manufacture of farm implements. During the spring of 1950 farmers in the suburbs of T'ai-yuan bought 1,000 work animals with funds from government loans. After land reform in Lin-ju Hsien, Honan, 3,878 head of work animals were purchased by farmers; in Lu-shan Hsien, 3,425 head; in Hsiang-ch'eng Hsien, 1,749 animals and 240 large farm carts. Throughout Honan local blacksmiths and carpenters are exceedingly busy repairing and making farm tools and implements.

In 1949, the peasants of Shantung bought 140,000 work animals. At present [1950], there are 3,410,000 work animals in the province. In the spring of 1950, farmers bought over 20,000 new well pumps. In the central-south portion of the province 10,000 new plows were purchased.

Preparation for Industrialization

Rice in the productive capacity and purchasing power of the peasant masses is the hope of industry since industry depends on agriculture for many raw materials and on farmers for a great share of its market.

Following land reform the rural standard of living rose from 60 to 70 percent of peasants in Sungkiang, 65 percent in Kirin and 54 percent in Heilungkiang. In southern Manchuria where land reform came later, a year after land reform, 33 percent of the peasants experienced a rise in their standard of living.

A 1949 investigation of 21 villages in 16 hsiens in Heilungkiang revealed that 50.6 percent of the hired peasants had become middle peasants or well-to-do middle peasants. Before land reform hired peasants represented one half of the rural population. Fifty-seven percent of poor peasants and 17.1 percent of originally middle peasants had also had a rise in living standards. For the rural population as a whole, 62.7 percent enjoyed a rise in living standards after land reform. The percentage of middle peasants in the rural population rose from 16 percent before land reform to 53.8 percent in 1949. Only one percent of poor peasants experienced a drop in living standards.

In 15 villages in eight hsiens of the more newly liberated portion of Liaotung Province, middle peasants increased from 939 families to 2,748 families, an increase of nearly 200 percent. In areas where land reform had been completed as early as 1947, there was a general rise in the living standards among all classes of peasants in North China in 1948 and 1949.

In an area of several hsiens in Shansi, in 1939, the proportion of peasant classes was: middle peasants 32.3 percent, poor peasants 42 percent, and hired peasants 5.4 percent. By 1949, the number of middle-class farmers reached 84 percent of the population.

In an investigation of 1,511 families in several hsiens in Hopeh; of 592 pre-land-reform middle peasant families, 14 families had become well-to-do middle peasants. Of 553 poor peasant families, 27 had become well-to-do middle peasants and 388 poor peasant families had become middle peasants.

Among 1,571 families of an original 767 families of poor peasants 593 families had become middle peasants and four families had become well-to-do middle peasants. Of the original 570 middle peasant families five families had become well-to-do and one family had become wealthy peasants.

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After land reform and the production drive the peasants that formerly never had enough grain now have surplus grain and supplementary industry products for sale.

The total value of peasant purchasing power in the Northeast in 1949 was the equivalent of 3,340,000 tons of grain. It is estimated it will rise to 5,660,000 tons in 1950. The state grain corporation estimated its prospective grain purchases from November 1949 to May 1950 at 900,000 tons. It actually purchased 1,700,000 tons and the peasants were anxious to sell another million tons.

For the first 2 years after land reform in the Northeast it was necessary for the government to loan grain to tide the peasants over from one crop to another, but by the summer of 1950 the peasants were busy hauling surplus grain to the markets every day, and they still had plenty to eat.

In seven hsiens of Tai-hsing Shan area of Shansi the total harvest was 6,230,000 piculs of grain, total expenses were 4,470,000 piculs, leaving a surplus of 1,760,000 piculs.

Increase of peasant purchasing power gives a lift to industry. In the Northeast cloth sale figures for a number of years have been as follows: 1946, 800,000 bolts; 1948, 1,200,000 bolts; 1949, 3,200,000 bolts. Estimates for 1950 are 9 million bolts (first-quarter actual sales were 2,500,000 bolts).

With the demand for increased quantity has also come a demand for better quality. The per capita requirement has risen from 5 feet in Manchukuo days to 20 feet in 1950.

In 1949, the value of industrial production in the Northeast was the equivalent of 7,960,000 tons of grain. This amount was 35 percent of the combined value of both agricultural and industrial output for the year. It is expected to reach 43 percent in 1950 for a total industrial production value equivalent to 15 million tons of grain. Both state-operated and privately operated industry is expanding in the Northeast.

Abundance

Rural livelihood conditions are showing steady improvement with plenty of clothing and food and much new housing. A daily meal of breadstuffs is now common, whereas wheat flour products were a rarity before land reform.

According to statistics from 5400 villages in Liaotung Province, 80,000 room units of new buildings have appeared since land reform. In Shuang-ch'eng Hsien, Sunkiang, 8,200 room units have been built.

Growth of Political Consciousness

Since land reform the participation of the peasants in rural political activities has greatly increased.

In Honan, by 1950, some 7 million peasants had been enrolled in the peasants associations in an area embracing 43 hsiens on all levels, from special administrative district to the hsiang level; 34 percent of these members are women. This membership represents 30-40 percent of the rural population. Of this membership, some 15,600 persons have been elected to offices of sufficient

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importance to take them out of production activities. Several hundreds of these peasant cadres have been elected to leadership in peasant associations on all levels up to the provincial. Some 26,000 progressive farmers have been accepted as members of the CCP and 57,000 as members of the New Democracy Youth Corps. In these 43 hsien there are 257,000 armed people's militia. Of 150,000 militia in 18 Ch'u in the Hsu-ch'ang and Hsin-yang Special Administrative Districts practically every man has a firearm.

In areas of Shensi where land reform has been completed, the Ch'u and Ts'un cadres have all been selected from among the peasants. Party and Youth Corps members are maintaining good relations. The people's self-protective troops have been organized and officers trained down to platoon leaders. They have set up check stations on all important road intersections. On occasion they make checks of the households.

In most of the Northeast, land reform was completed in the period July 1946 to June 1947. The result was almost universal participation of the peasants in all the activities leading to victory for the people throughout the nation.

In North Kiangsu, the peasants served the liberation forces in the winter campaign of 1948-49 and the crossing of the Yangtze River in 1949. They supplied 227,500,000 catties of grain, 226 million catties of fuel and hay, 250,000 catties of pork, and 30,000 catties of oil to the liberation forces. They also supplied their quota of the 8,302 boats used in crossing the Yangtze River and the 12,675 boats used in service behind the lines.

Cultural Advance

With the economic improvement of the masses attendant upon land reform it was natural for the peasants to recognize the need of personal cultural advancement.

In the Northeast, 1,575,000 peasants have joined year-round educational activities and 20,000 winter schools have become year-round centers of peasant mass education. Small study groups numbering over 40,000 have been organized. As a local example of the interest in cultural activity, a village in Chi-yuan Hsien, Heilungkiang, will serve. This village of 177 persons had never had a literate person in it. In the spring of 1949, the villagers raised funds and built and equipped a good-sized school building. All children above 6 years old, including some girls up to 17 or 18, entered school. Forty-six pupils were enrolled. Sixty adults enrolled in literacy classes. A majority of the villagers were thus enrolled for school training.

In the winter of 1949, 3,600,000 peasants enrolled for study in North China. Most of these can now [1950] recognize from 200 to 600 characters, can keep simple accounts, and can write letters.

In Shansi, 20,000 winter schools were opened in 1949, practically two for each administrative village. In the spring of 1950, the more successful ones became permanent. Some 3,000 regular schools have been built. In some villages the whole able-bodied population has entered some form of school. The required equipment for study is a slate, slate pencils, a writing brush, and a lead pencil.

In some parts of Honan primary school attendance rose more than 30 percent and middle-school attendance 16 percent. Interest in adult education is also strong.

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In East China the story is essentially the same. Hundreds of thousands of illiterate adults are flocking to the winter schools.

Such cultural activities as amateur theatricals, wall newspapers, skit writing and acting, etc., are all very popular throughout the countryside. Most of these activities are devoted to propaganda for the government programs.

A New Society and a New Life

Land reform has given rural life an entirely new aspect. Many names of villages, formerly known by the name of the village landlord, have been changed to represent the new situation. "Liberation Village," "Democracy Village," etc., indicate the people's feeling that the villages belong to them.

In the villages there are no longer any nonproducers, no beggars, nor any vagrants. Practically all the former landlords are working the land like all other peasants. Women are now free from the bondage of the old marriage system and youths can arrange their own marriages. Widows and formerly impecunious bachelors can establish happy homes. Improved economic conditions and mutual interest in cultural activities have reduced points of friction among family members to a minimum. Women have realized their rights as having received land the same as their men. They have also recognized the responsibility attached thereto and have entered productive agricultural activities in vast numbers, working and being paid on the same basis as men.

Superstitious practices and blind reliance on the gods for sustenance and protection have given way to self-reliance and realization of the value of hard work. Pictures of the gods in the homes have been replaced by those of Chairman Mao whom the people now recognize as a real tangible benefactor.

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